

First Congregational Church
301 Benefit Street
Providence, Rhode Island
Providence County

HABS No. 159

HABS
RI,
4-PROV,
43-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Philip D. Creer, District Officer
14 College Street, Providence, R.I.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, NOW FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH

HABS
RI,
4-PROV,
43-

Address: 301 Benefit Street, Southeast corner Benefit and
Benevolent Streets, Providence, Providence County,
Rhode Island.

An addendum to
First Congregational Church
Benefit and Benevolent Streets
Providence, Rhode Island
in HABS Catalog (1941).

Present Owner
and Occupant: First Unitarian Society,
Providence, Rhode Island.

Present Use: Church.

Brief Statement
of Significance: This is a large, attractive stone church, built
1815-1816, and designed by an important Providence
architect, John Holden Greene. Very few altera-
tions have been made to the church, and the build-
ing Greene considered his most successful work sur-
vives nearly as he knew it.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: The First Congregational Society, which became Unitarian in 1821. It was then called The First Congregational Church, Unitarian. The name was changed in 1953 to First Unitarian Society.
2. Date of erection: Cornerstone laid May 29, 1815; church dedicated October 31, 1816.
3. Architect, builder, suppliers, etc.: Mason - Zachariah Chafee. Bell - Paul Revere and son, of Massachusetts. Said to be the largest ever cast by them. Clock - Simon Wellard supplied the clock and cleaned and repaired it. It was made in 1804. The building cost \$45,426.69 and with extras a total of \$48,000.00. The pulpit cost about \$500; the organ cost about \$1400; the bell cost about \$1100. Mr. Goodrich of Boston rebuilt the old organ for the new church for \$1400 - on the same plan and equal to the Brattle Street organ in Boston. /from the Church Records at Rhode Island Historical Society./

4. Notes on alterations and additions: Originally the pulpit stood on a platform raised two feet above the floor with two steps leading up to it. The platform was removed and the pulpit lowered in 1837.

The top of the steeple was blown off in the great gale of 1836 and is now about three feet lower than originally.

The interior was restored in 1915. This was mostly painting and the removal of stained glass windows. Lord: An Old New England Meeting House.

A heating plant has been added and electricity.

5. Important old views: Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, Rhode Island.
The Church Office of the First Unitarian Church, Benevolent Street, Providence, Rhode Island.
6. Sources of information: Church records at the Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, Rhode Island, Book #2 containing the records of the First Congregational Society.
John Hutchins Cady, The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence 1636-1950 (Providence, Rhode Island: The Book Shop, 1957), pp. 85-86.
Antoinette Forrester Downing, Early Homes of Rhode Island (Richmond, Virginia: Garrett and Massie, 1937), pp. 415, 418-422.
Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr., Rhode Island Architecture, (Providence: Rhode Island Museum Press, 1939), p. 21.
Augustus Mendon Lord, An Old New England Meeting House, a sermon preached by Dr. Lord, October 29, 1916 in honor of the 100th anniversary of the First Congregational (now First Unitarian) Meeting House. (Privately printed, 1916).
Old Providence, A Collection of Facts and Traditions Relating to Various Buildings and Sites of Historic Interest in Providence, (Providence, Rhode Island: The Merchants National Bank of Providence, 1918).
Old Time New England, The Bulletin of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, Vol. XIV, No. 1 (July, 1923), p. 7.

Prepared by Margaret Fletcher
for the Providence Preservation Society

August, 1961.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement

1. Architectural character: This is a large rectangular, stone building, with a classic ordered facade combined with Gothic windows, a tall storied tower, a hung plaster domed ceiling that is one of the most beautiful in any early nineteenth century building, and original furniture designed by the architect. Downing, Early Homes of Rhode Island, points out the similarities between this building and Bulfinch's New South Church in Boston built two years earlier. The church survives nearly unchanged.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: Rectangular main auditorium, about 75' long (3 bays) x 80' wide, one story with gallery plus cellar. Small vestry room on rear (east) side, about 15' deep x 25' wide, one story. Narthex at west (front) end, about 20' deep x 45' wide, with tower above.
2. Foundations: Granite, regular coursed ashlar on front where exposed.
3. Wall construction: Granite, laid in regular coursed ashlar on the front and north sides along the streets, laid random and not dressed on the east (rear) and south sides. Quoins of the corners.
4. Openings;
 - a. Doors: Two small rear (on the east) doors lead to passageways beside the vestry room. On the facade, which is divided into three bays by the ordonnance, three main doorways lead into the narthex at the base of the tower with rusticated openings. The two side doors have broken pediments, and the center door a full Doric entablature supported by columns and pilasters. Each doorway has double, paneled doors.
 - b. Windows: Tall round-headed windows, divided by a center mullion forming a pointed, arched, Gothic tracery pattern. The window over the center entrance is similar, but larger and divided into three parts, and breaks the horizontal entablature of the narthex pediment.

5. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Gable roof, standing seam metal covering. The roof is supported by an interconnected series of transverse trusses and two longitudinal trusses supported by the four columns in the auditorium.
- b. Cornice: Mutule cornice with drilled ornament.

6. Tower: The tower is above the narthex, which is divided by four colossal Doric columns and has a Doric entablature and cornice. The tower has three stages - one square and two octagonal, and a tall spire. All three stages have Corinthian ornament; the square stage has corner paneled pilasters and clocks on three faces; the second stage is an open belfry; the third stage is enclosed with windows; both second and third stages have columns on pedestals at the corners, and entablatures which break out at the corners, thereby emphasizing the verticality of the tower.

C. Technical Description of Interior

1. Floor plans: The church is arranged with a narthex on the west end under the tower, a nave or auditorium, and a small vestry room at the east end. The auditorium is a large rectangular room, nearly square, with a U-shaped gallery across the west end and the north and south sides. Four fluted composite columns are set in from the four corners of the auditorium at the line of the gallery. The hung plaster ceiling is in the form of a flat dome, nearly circular in plan, springing from the four columns which support a thin cornice. A high pulpit is at the east end of the auditorium.
2. Stairways: Stairways are located in the narthex. Across most of the width of the narthex, from the three front doors, is a wide flight of eight steps leading to the level of the auditorium. Stairways at both north and side ends of the narthex lead down to the cellar and up to the galleries. Cellar steps are large blocks of granite. Stairs to the galleries are U-shaped with winders, and have closed, paneled railings. One stairway continues up to the belfry and tower.
3. Flooring: The lower level of the narthex floor is paved with stone slabs 8" x 20" in size. Other floors are wood, and the auditorium floor is entirely carpeted.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Narthex walls and ceilings are simply plastered and painted. Walls and ceilings in the auditorium are mostly plaster and highly decorated. The

hung plaster dome of the ceiling is divided into an inner and outer ring. The flat inner ring has a molded plaster medallion, of thin linear foliated ornaments; the outer ring is divided into coffer-like panels. A large brass and iron chandelier with three circular tiers of lights hangs from the center of the ceiling. The triangular spandrels in from corners of the ceiling have cast plaster ornament in a radiating pattern. The four columns have stilts or plinths in the form of a square section of entablature, fully ornamented. The fronts of the galleries are paneled and trimmed with bands of fret, reeded, and scrolled moldings. The auditorium floor and galleries have pews with paneled ends and doors.

5. Pulpit: The high balcony-like pulpit at the east end of the auditorium is dark mahogany, unstained and highly polished. It is 12' wide, 3-1/2' deep at the sides, curving out to 6' deep at the center. An enclosed stairway, 2-1/2' wide, is behind the pulpit and runs the full 12' width. The pulpit stands on four Ionic columns at the front which are repeated as engaged columns or pilasters at the back. Above the columns, at the floor level of the pulpit, is a full entablature with modillion cornice. Above, the solid upper sides of the pulpit are paneled in large curved areas of matched veneers; the corners are marked with engaged Corinthian colonettes. On the wall above the pulpit is an arched plaster panel, highly ornamented, with composite columns at the sides.
6. Vestry Room: Walls and ceilings in the vestry room are plaster, with a denticulated cornice. There is a paneled wainscot around the entire room, and small, decorated mantel.
7. Doorways and doors: Interior doors are large six panel doors with elaborate moldings. Doorways have paneled jambs and either molded or reeded architraves, ~~and~~ doorways have elaborate heads with full entablatures; the doorways at the west end have pilasters beside the architraves, and the gallery doorways have broken pediments.
8. Hardware: Original brass hardware throughout. Doors have unusual T-shaped knobs.
9. Lighting: Electric. In the main auditorium, sconces are used in addition to the main chandelier.
10. Heating: Modern central hot air heat. An open iron fireplace is in the vestry room.

D. Site

1. Orientation: The church faces west at the southeast corner of Benefit and Benevolent Streets.
2. Walks: Flagstone and brick walks. A flight of seven granite steps leads up from the sidewalk level at the street.
3. Landscaping: The grounds at front of the church are about 1-1/2' above sidewalk level, with long slabs of cut granite as a retaining wall, and are landscaped with lawn, evergreen shrubs and large trees. The building is on the sidewalk on the north side and is surrounded by driveways and a parking lot on the east and south sides.

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect
National Park Service
Philadelphia 6, Penna.
August, 1961